SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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LAUREN TOZZI OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

INTERVIEWEE: LAUREN TOZZI

INTERVIEWER: CINDY COLE

SUBJECTS: UNION MEMBERS; INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD; STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY; GEORGE MCGOVERN; RICHARD NIXON; QUESTIONING AUTHORITY; UNITED FARM WORKERS SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE; WORTHY WAGES MOVEMENT; GEORGE HARDY AWARD; SEATTLE PROPOSITION 1A AND 1B; ECONOMIC JUSTICE; ACTIVISM; HANFORD NUCLEAR SITE; CONTRACT WITH AMERICA; MUSIC AND ARTS ACTIVISM; ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE; KAYAKTIVISM; JANET STECHER

LOCATION: SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

DATE: NOVEMBER 17, 2015

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:20:32

FILE NAME: TozziLauren_SLCOHC_2015_Audio.wav

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is a recording for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. I am interviewing Lauren Tozzi in Seattle, Washington. The date is November 17, 2015 and the interviewer is Cindy Cole. Lauren, why don't you just start out a little bit about when you were born, where were you born, and talk a little bit about your family and your background.

[00:00:37] **LAUREN TOZZI:** Okay, I'll do that. I was born in Van Nuys, California, in 1958. I'm the last out of five children to Lorenzo and Lucy Tozzi. All my grandparents come from southern Italy and Sicily. My father, Lorenzo, was a sheet metal worker. He was a union member. My mother, after raising five of us, went to work at a department store called Zodys in Canoga Park, California, and she was a member of the UFCW

[United Food and Commercial Workers]. Both my parents were strong union supporters. My father was a shop steward at Rocketdyne, which was an aerospace company.

He got my brother, Michael, a job at the Herald Examiner in Los Angeles. There were a lot of safety concerns and my brother—what I just found out recently—my brother filed a grievance and the safety rules were created. My brother said that having that experience made him understand the need for higher education, and also the importance of unions.

I didn't get to talk to my parents too much about their union activity, although we did support the Farm Workers grape and lettuce boycott. I was a very young child when my father looked at me with his finger stretched out [laughing] and said, "Never be a snitch and never cross a picket line." I didn't know what either one was. The first, of course, comes from our Italian background [laughing], not to generalize. But both my parents were incredibly hard workers. One time my father had three jobs. I think I learned the value of hard work from my parents, and to do your best whatever that job was.

I'm not a union member. My brother was a union member. He was a teacher. But my upbringing was interesting—very Italian, working class. I just want to acknowledge the hard work of my parents, because I think it had a huge impact on my life and my values of hard work. And also, fighting the good fight for other people. I think I'm a Wobbly at heart. I believe that an injury of one is an injury to all. But my parents had a huge impact on me, as well as my brother, Michael, who was 17 years old when I was born. He was very active with SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. They worked very hard and some day, I hope to be a member of a union. But I do want to acknowledge my parents for having such big hearts and big hands, and understanding about solidarity.

[00:04:12] **CINDY:** Do you want to talk about some of your school experiences?

[00:04:15] **LAUREN:** Well, in junior high school, I was on the debate team, and my brother Michael, during the Vietnam War, gave me a lot of information about the use of napalm. I remember it was when George McGovern was campaigning—that was during the McGovern-Nixon election—and I upset one of my teachers so much, he yelled at me to leave the classroom, because I was talking about what Nixon was doing. I was very political at a young age, and did a lot of work in junior high school and high school.

[00:05:23] **CINDY:** Was that against the Vietnam War?

[00:05:25] **LAUREN:** Well, before it was against the Vietnam War, and it certainly was when George McGovern was campaigning against Richard Nixon. I remember our whole class, our whole school, had an election. It was almost unanimous for Nixon. There were just our little rowdy group that were wanting McGovern. But I just remember upsetting this one history teacher so much that he told me to leave the classroom and was yelling at me.

I remember being a tad embarrassed, but I also remember feeling that I had found my voice at that point, and it was very exciting. I mean, I didn't shy away from anyone yelling because my father was a boxer. I had to learn how to have a pretty thick skin as a young kid. [laughing] But I do remember that I really felt like we were really speaking the truth, and that so many kids were being misguided. And the fact that this history teacher got so angry with me and threw me out of the class, that I really needed to question authority even more. I think finding your voice is really important, and that's why I certainly support young people in their endeavors. Because finding your voice is very empowering.

[00:07:00] **CINDY:** What are some other organizations that you worked for or worked with? What's your line of work that you do?

[00:07:10] **LAUREN:** My line of work is I'm a preschool teacher, early childhood education teacher. Currently I work at a cooperative, so I get to be the teacher, the principal, the director all rolled in one. I wear many hats. I with all parents could work at cooperatives, to be involved in their child's early years, because they're so fundamentally important.

When I first came to Seattle, I got involved in a United Farm Workers Solidarity Committee, like I said, with my background of my parents supporting the Farm Workers. Then I got involved with Worthy Wages movement. It was a movement to organize preschool teachers around our rights, raises and respect. We were called the Worthy Wages taskforce, which I got an award in 1998, but we had done work many years before that.

[00:08:17] **CINDY:** What does the award say?

[00:08:18] **LAUREN:** The award says—now, I don't know who George Hardy is—but it says "George Hardy Memorial Organizing Award July 11, 1998, in the category of the most original or creative approach to new organizing awarded to Lauren Tozzi, District [9 to 5? 00:08:32]." That was certainly a feather in my cap.

We didn't have a lot of money, being preschool teachers, of course. We worked very hard to not only empower each other, but also empower and education parents, the community. It's kind of like the rock in the water. We just created these wonderful ripples of empowerment that led to a movement across the country. We went on strike on May 1. What that meant in 1997, I believe, 50 centers closed their doors. We worked and organized for at least six months to make people understand, especially if parents didn't have childcare, how that affected the workplace.

It was about rights, raises and respect. Back then we were looked at as babysitters. Now, in 2015, people are realizing the importance of early childhood education.

Organizing childcare teachers has been really tough, because there's teachers like me who—self interest isn't what drives me. I hope that we can join a teachers' union somebody. But we also have teachers who are apolitical, teachers who have a second income because they have partners. So, organizing preschool teachers has been hard, and it's still hard to this day. Especially in Seattle, there's still incredibly high turnover. Even though we've made incredible strides, and people are making livable wages, not all. But we worked so hard, and Seattle has just been—we were like the flame that lit the [fire?] so to speak. But we have a long way to go.

I also had won an achievement there for doing Prop 1A, which we lost, unfortunately—the Worthy Wages founder award—in 2014. We did a lot of our work even before the Internet, so a lot of our work was unknown. But now, just to know that people are still acknowledging Worthy Wages and the movement, and how it led to childcare teachers organizing across the country.

[00:11:25] **CINDY:** Why don't you explain what Proposition 1A was.

[00:11:28] **LAUREN:** Proposition 1A, there were two propositions, one Prop 1B, which Tim Burgess on the Seattle City Council supported. It was more of a corporate model, kind of common core kind of model.

Prop 1A would have increased funding to low-income centers. It would have given money with grants and money already allotted to the City to expand quality programs, which we worked really hard. Unfortunately, Prop B had a lot more money, and it won. But I think that this recent—which I don't know enough about—the recent childcare initiative that Dow Constantine supported, it took a lot of the work from Proposition 1A, and

hopefully it's going to expand these high-quality centers that provide quality care to low income. Because it's always been low-income kids who aren't getting a head start. And they need that head start because they're never going to achieve a quality education if they don't get that head start in the beginning.

I think all the work that Worthy Wages did, it's created an incredible awareness and consciousness. I'm really proud of the work that I did with Worthy Wages. Even though Worthy Wages doesn't exist anymore, we have a Department of Early Learning, we've got something called [Wheel?]. We're not unionized yet, but someday that will happen. But I'm just proud to know that we just did so much grassroots wonderful organizing. It was so exciting. We closed down a City Council hearing and wore little animal masks, saying we were an endangered species. We did such wonderful, creative stuff, and I'm just so proud to be part of that. I miss those grassroots days. But it was good work.

[00:13:38] **CINDY:** Are there other activist things that you've done in your life that really stand out for you?

[00:13:47] **LAUREN:** Well, I've always been a part of the economic justice movement, not just for preschoolers but for low-wage workers. And I've done a lot of environmental justice work. I was one of the kayaktivists. I was arrested at the 15 Now recently.

I was also arrested 25, 30 years ago at Hanford. That was my first arrest. I'm not remembering the year, but when Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the House and they were doing the contract—he called it "with" America, we said "on" America—we took over the Republican headquarters here in Seattle. They called us the "Seattle 31."

I think I understand that I do believe that an injury to one is an injury to all. I'm probably forgetting some of my other activism, but I think that all these things are connected. I just believe that you have to put your butt on the line, and we have to fight for others who can't fight for themselves. But primarily, it really has been around economic justice. Recently I've been doing a lot of work with environmental justice.

I believe that music and art has had a huge impact on movements, and that's why I love to do work with Backbone and do art, but also being with the Labor Chorus. You don't have to speak another person's language, but if there's art and music, it's a wonderful way of bringing people in, and it's a great way to just uplift people's spirits and souls.

[00:15:44] **CINDY:** Why don't you talk a little bit more about how you got involved with the Seattle Labor Chorus? Any music background?

[00:15:53] **LAUREN:** Well, we always had music playing my childhood. My mother and her seven siblings were all named after characters in operas. My father played the violin, my mother played the piano. There was always jazz and opera and, of course, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. [laughing] All those great Italian singers.

I think, too, as I learned about movements, how important music has been. I remember seeing the Labor Chorus at Bumbershoot and I can't tell you—that I think the spark of electricity went through my body. I just remember being so in awe of the Labor Chorus, and that they were singing songs about people and workers' rights. I remember thinking, I want to be a part of this. But then I also, unfortunately, I thought—question your own assumptions—I thought you had to read music. I thought, well, I can't read music.

So a couple years went by, and then I just remember seeing something about the Labor Chorus again—where the auditions were—and I said, "I'm going to go." And I went. I think it was at least 10 or 11 years ago. I'm there still. It's a huge part of my life. I love being a member. I love Janet [Stecher]. I think she's brilliant. And I just love that I'm a part of this incredible group of people, because I think music and arts save lives. It's a huge

part of my life. I don't know, all these years, what I would have done without it, because I think I would have had this huge void. Music is a huge part of my life, as well as art. And I look forward to every Tuesday—unless, of course, I'm not feeling well. Working with little people, they're little germ buckets. [laughing]

Like I said, I love Janet. I love the way the Labor chorus. I love what we're doing. I love the message that we're sending. And I know when people come to see us, their spirits are uplifted like mine was the first time I heard it. I just feel really privileged and honored to be part of the chorus.

[00:18:44] **CINDY:** Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about or share?

[00:18:55] **LAUREN:** No, I just really appreciate being interviewed. Sometimes I feel like we, as individuals, don't even acknowledge the work that we do. I certainly don't toot my horn very much, but I do believe that connecting the dots is really hard work. But I think all the things that we do are connected.

I think I had mentioned, too, when we had talked that Alice Walker has this quote about that her activism pays the rent for this time on the earth. And I do believe in quotes. I think they can be a microcosm of philosophies. And I think when I heard that quote, I felt like that resonated with me. So I just want to keep on singing and creating art and teaching and organizing and fighting the good fight, because it just fills my soul. I'm just so thankful and grateful that I've been able to do the work that I have, I'm able to sing, and know all these wonderful people because they just enrich my life. I hope I can do all this work till the day I die. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

[00:20:27] **CINDY:** Sure. Thanks so much, Lauren.